DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 397 414 CS 215 339

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TITLE Power and Contact: Transcending Authority in the Classroom.
PUB DATE Mar 96
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (47th, Milwaukee, WI, March 27-30, 1996).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Communication; *Freshman Composition; Group Discussion; Group Dynamics; Higher Education; *Multicultural Education; Political Attitudes; *Racial Bias; Sex Bias; Student Attitudes; *Teacher Student Relationship; *Whites
IDENTIFIERS *Authority; Educational Issues; Rutgers The State University NJ

ABSTRACT

One of the prerequisites or unavoidable results of multiculturalism is that the classroom becomes what Mary Louise Pratt calls a "contact zone." But how does the teacher keep discussion productive without taking sides? How does the teacher abdicate enough authority to diminish the asymmetricality but not so much that the class becomes a shapeless mass? When students meet and clash with each other and with the teacher, chances are good that the teacher's authority will become eroded. Within the spectrum of student political approaches is the student who is openly belligerent to the multicultural agenda and the student who is "converted" or will simply give the teacher what he/she wants. But most classrooms consist of those in the middle, those who reconstitute the nature of the polarity being discussed as a means of eliminating completely any traces of asymmetricality. In other words, they make their own experiences compete with the textual expression of Black authors. An example of a student in English 102 at Rutgers illustrates this point. The student is representative of a group with which most composition teachers are familiar: white, middle class, from a homogeneous suburban or rural background, and uncomfortable talking about race. In her final essay, if she was not less racist, the student repositioned her cultural views within the dominant terms of the discussion. One possible approach to such students would be to foreground and problematize the position of whiteness. (TB)

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Power and Contact: Transcending Authority in the Classroom

One of the prerequisites, or unavoidable results, of multiculturalism is that you transform your classroom into a "contact zone," a place which Mary Louise Pratt now so famously defines as a space where "cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power" (34). But it seems to me that two things happen to the concept of teacher authority when the classroom becomes a contact zone. First, if the students are grappling with their own power relationships, then how does the teacher keep the discussion productive without taking sides, risking being politically marked in an explicit way that will shut some students off to him? And, second, how does the teacher abdicate enough authority to diminish the asymmetricality, but not so much that the class becomes a shapeless mass?

Most frequently, the way these authority issues manifest themselves are in methods of student resistance, and nowhere is this resistance more apparent than in the multicultural, but homogeneous white classroom -- white classroom, white teacher -- where the subject is race. This resistance comes as the result of each student's construction of a teacher with multiple meanings, texts, and subtexts. This is certainly problematic when the teacher is a woman, a person of color, or both. As Cheryl L. Johnson says, "When students encounter a professor enclosed in a racial/gendered body, her very presence in the

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classroom inaugurates the creation of another decipherable text" (410). But this is no less of an authority problem when the teacher is, like me, white.

The most frequent reading students -- and for the purposes of this essay, I want to concentrate on my relationship with white students, especially politically conservative white students -- make of me, I assume, given the historical political position of most English Departments (and academics in general) is that of the "white liberal," in the students' vague sense of that term. Everything they hear me say is filtered through that sense of who I am, and is changed in the process. This collapse of my character into the stereotyped liberal, and the corresponding creation of my (in the view of some of them) "correct" conservative opposite mirrors a political dichotomizing that occurs outside the classroom.

First, the truth. These students are correct: I am on the political left. But the larger issue is how do my politics affect my teaching? The answer is undeniable that they do, but this effect is not to be confused with a social agenda of reform. When I teach texts about race, I seek primarily to problematize that idea for students -- to get them to see the term for the social and cultural construct that it is. In short, I am not out to turn students toward the left. Rather, I am trying to perform the work of Composition no less than if the text were Plato: think, and think again, about your closely held views and about the texts you read. Prejudice has no place in the college

classroom because the very nature of pre-judging forecloses the possibility of thought. This holds for my students who are on the left as well. I am never content to let them "think what I think" -- I demand the same level of questioning of them, of their use of terms, just as I do of myself. For, if Cornel West is right when he says that all Americans -- of all races -- believe implicitly in the idea of white supremacy, then how do I deal with whatever ideas of racialism I have within me?

The questions about teacher authority here are, of course, numerous and complex, and the implications for classroom practice are immense: What happens to a teacher's authority in a classroom that cannot construct it -- cannot believe in it -- in traditional ways? Let me ask this another, more theoretically familiar way: what becomes of the concept of teacher authority when you intentionally place your class in a contact zone? When you demand that your students "meet, clash, grapple" with each other -- and with you -- and to "put ideas and identities on the line" as Pratt suggests, chances are good that the students' construction of you, and your role in the classroom, may suffer some erosion.

For the purposes of this paper, it is first necessary to state what I mean by authority, then consider the nature of one model of student resistance located in my classroom, and then finally explore ways to continue -- and refine -- the process of institutional "decentering" begun by Paulo Freire.

I say we must "refine," and even adapt, Freire's ideas

because his "problem-posing" education, while extraordinarily useful as a general model of student-teacher interaction and student self-actualization, is considerably narrowed by the specific relationship between the students and the teacher on which he bases his ideas. Freire the teacher seems not to have the same trouble I have in my class: resistance is less likely when, from the very start, teacher and student agree on their asymmetrical power relationship. His students are, on the whole, aware of their oppression and powerlessness, are eager to be empowered, and clearly see him as the means to that end. This is what I mean by a kind of idealized classroom authority. It might have simple manifestations -- getting work in on time, or having assignments read by the due date -- but its more important synonym is a kind of intellectual trust the students place in you. They can clearly define their own interests in being in your class, and they know that you respect and privilege these interests. Part of this self-interest on their part is in granting you expertise (to one degree or other) in the field: you know how to get them to write more clearly and they do not. On the other hand, those resistant white students in my class assumed a smaller gap, if any at all, between my authority and theirs; what they feel that they have learned about blacks outweighs anything I, from my reading, or the texts from theirs, have to tell them about black oppression.

The now-famous, and extreme, example of this teacher authority issue is Scott Lankford's student who wrote a

disturbing essay about a violent gay-bashing in San Francisco. The questions usually raised by this essay, "Queers, Bums, and Magic," are all about propriety of response: should Lankford have considered the work fictional, criticizing its surface with little regard to content? Or should he have assumed the events were real, and reported the student to the police, or at least lectured the student on appropriate social conduct? Lankford treated the essay as fiction, assigning it a low B, an approach used to deflect the student writer's attempt to "bash" his professor. In this way, the student "learned to cope with an openly gay instructor with some measure of civility" (qtd. in Miller 393).

Thus, the student in the contact zone of Lankford's class learns that his opinions are not automatically dismissed by the teacher in ways that he assumed they would be; by heightening and then challenging these assumptions, Lankford is able to meet with "qualified success" because the student develops a coping strategy that serves his own interests. But, as Richard Miller suggests, there is a third way of responding -- to make the writer revise the essay from the beaten man's point of view. But, even then, the problem will not go away: the student, according to Miller, will more than likely produce a work of "seamless parody," which successfully masks the student's hatred under a veneer of "hyperconformity."

Lankford's student's essay illuminates the crisis of teacher authority because it attempts to exploit the distinction between

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the writer's interests and those of the teacher. This type of student resistance is at the far end of the spectrum of responses found within the classroom contact zone; at the other end are what we might call "the converted" -- those students either already in accord with the principles of multiculturalism, or who quickly see an opportunity to "give the teacher what he wants" by producing conformist texts. But the majority of the classrooms I have been in are made up of those students in the middle. They don't "hate" like Lankford's student; their racism is more subtle, confused, and often self-interrogating, and their resistance poses the most insidious threat of subverting the teacher's authority.

I call this type of resistance "reconstitution" because the student reconstitutes the nature of the polarity he sees at the heart of the classroom discussion as a means to reconfigure the authority in that classroom, to eliminate completely any traces of asymmetricality, and make his experiences compete with the textual expressions of black authors. He does this by first determining the politics of those who disagree with him, then repositioning himself within the framework of that opposition, thereby redefining the terms of the opposition itself. As a result, in his textual presentation, though his position has not changed, it reassigns the terms of what he sees as the teacher's smugly "correct" view into a text that is at once "conservative" and "progressive." This is not the same as "giving the teacher what he wants"; it is a strategy which seeks to further the

interests of both parties simultaneously. Cheryl Johnson puts it this way: "readers who encounter a racially, culturally, or linguistically different text may read their perceptions of these differences into the text, manipulating the language to conform to their culturally learned assumptions" (412).

As an example of this manipulation, I would like to talk about a student in my English 102 research class at Rutgers University on the topic of "Race and Rights." We read Patricia Williams's The Alchemy of Race and Rights, Richard Wright's Uncle Tom's Children, and selections from Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois. Of the twenty-five students in the class, 12 were white. One day in the earliest weeks of the semester, one of the white students, I'll call her Jean, came up after class and asked belligerently: "Do we have to talk about blacks in our essays?" In a class whose stated purpose was to discuss race and rights, I explained to her, she could examine any race she chose, but since the readings were by African-American writers, she might find it difficult to ignore "the problem of the color line." She was no less resistant in the next few weeks, and while she did not manifest this resistance vocally in class, I overheard a few comments which she confided to the students in her all-white peer review group.

However, I do not wish to present Jean's work as part of a "conversion narrative," evidence that the contact zone works by making students "grapple" with things they don't understand or value, by exposing them to real-life situations that realize and

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resolve the problems of asymmetrical power relations. Rather, I believe that she is representative of a group of students with which most Composition teachers are familiar: white, middle class, from a homogeneous suburban or rural background, and uncomfortable talking about race. Her comments clearly indicated that she was a racist at the outset of the course; her written text suggested, on the surface at least, that she was less so by the end. But I am not convinced that she was less racist by the end of the course. Rather, I suspect that she discovered a way to act out her views on race in ways which might be interpreted as racial tolerance.

For example, in her final research project, Jean told me she wanted to write about her workplace, where she observed discriminatory work practices. When I asked her to describe these practices, she told me that there were two kinds of jobs -- full-time benefits and part-time non-benefits -- and that the part-time jobs were regularly given to black candidates. The full-time, full-benefit jobs were reserved for whites. As I began to tell her how to proceed with this project, which I thought to be a classic case of racially motivated employment discrimination, she corrected me by revealing that the "discrimination" she perceived was that it was too difficult for white candidates to get any of these part-time jobs. By overlooking the restrictions against blacks and emphasizing instead white difficulty -- by conflating affirmative action and reverse racism -- she reconstitutes these into a "personal"

definition of affirmative action that simultaneously accommodates two opposing viewpoints -- one (to appeal to my interests) an outcry that discrimination is wrong, and the other (to appeal to her own) that it is especially unfair when it affects everyone, i.e. the white middle class. By looking at the language of Jean's essay, we can see how this reconstitution makes its appearance as the paradoxical desire for an affirmative action policy which is based on the concept of earned rewards. She writes:

> At some point the employer should observe the applicant's abilities, as opposed to focusing on the expectations portrayed by the affirmative action program. Williams believes that she became a successful law professor based on her abilities to perform her job adequately and not because of affirmative action. Although affirmative action qualified her for admission to law school, Patricia Williams would state that her true capabilities can be observed in her being a studious individual the first semester she entered college.

By glossing over the hiring issue ("at some point"), and by confusing the expectations of the employer with those of affirmative action, Jean directs her focus instead onto the idea of performative accountability, and aligns her interests with those of the employer.

I do not wish to demonize Jean, or any of my 102 students, most of whom found themselves facing a very real cultural dilemma: talking about that which is uncomfortable in an academy which places great weight on "opening one's mind." Placed in a class that assumed, as Henry Giroux does, that each student would show "trust, sharing, and commitment to improving the quality of

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human life" (72), my 102 students saw a critical thinking pedagogy as repressive and stifling. In their reading of my agenda, I was expecting a shocked, leftist offense at racial discrimination, and they resisted this "coercion," not by changing their views, but by repositioning them within the dominant terms of the discussion.

My experience with Jean reminds me Elizabeth Ellsworth's experience at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. Attempting to work against a rising tide of racism on her campus, Ellsworth held a graduate seminar entitled "Media and Anti-Racist Pedagogies," which attempted to

> not only work to clarify the structures of institutional racism underlying university practices and its culture in Spring 1988, but that would also use that understanding to plan and carry out a political intervention within that formation (299).

However, according to Ellsworth, far from being liberating, the course was debilitating:

> [W]hen participants in our class attempted to put into practice prescriptions offered in the literature concerning empowerment, student voice, and dialogue, we produced results that were not only unhelpful, but actually exacerbated the very conditions we were trying to work against, including Eurocentrism, racism, sexism, classism, and "banking education." (298)

Further, students "expressed much pain, confusion, and difficulty in speaking because of the ways in which discussions called up multiple and contradictory social positionings" (312). For example, white students in the class found it difficult to speak about race because it meant subordinating their own oppression as people "living under U.S. imperialist policies" (312).

The questions remain: what do we do with these heuristic issues? How can we work it so that heuristic self-instruction, which is based on their trust that I will look out for their interests, is not voided by their rejection of my authority? Can we solve these problems in a way that maintains our authority -- their intellectual trust in us? The first answer is that we need to theorize our position in the classroom in a way that goes beyond decentering. Perhaps one way white teachers in white classrooms might resolve these authority dilemmas is to understand and foreground a position of "whiteness," for both teacher and student, just as Toni Morrison, AnnLouise Keating, and others are now exploring the notion of a whiteness found in literary texts. This is in accord with Kobena Mercer's observation that "the real challenge in the new cultural politics of difference is to make 'whiteness' visible for the first time, as a culturally constructed ethnic identity historically contingent upon the disavowal and violent denial of difference" (205-6).

"Whiteness" is a position of "invisible omnipresence" (Keating 905), coded with significations of domination, order, rationality, and control. Not coincidentally, these are the same prerequisites of teacher's authority, left, perhaps, as an imprint by the generations of white teachers who have laid the grid of white authority over the ideal of classroom authority.

Therefore, to engage in a problem-posing pedagogy is to seek to deconstruct these principles of "white" power, as is any

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attempt to decenter one's classroom. It seems to me that the most effective way to work against a student's reconstituted resistance of my rejection -- my redefining -- of white authority is to transcend the idea of power-based authority, exposing for all what has historically constituted that authority in the first place. This does not mean that I desire to "deracialize" everyone into a bland "humanity," but that by foregrounding for my students my position within a historicized idea of whiteness, I also foreground my expectations, my desires, and the very way in which I wish to construct -- even reconstruct -- my definition of authority for the purposes of their self-instruction.

Perhaps such resistant responses are the unavoidable results of the multicultural, contact-zoned classroom, and are not necessarily a bad thing. In saying that "required self-reflexivity does not, of course, guarantee that repugnant positions will be abandoned," Richard Miller reassures us that creating a pedagogy of the contact zone is nonetheless worthwhile -- that by having students "interrogate literate practices inside and outside the classroom" and by having them "work with challenging texts that speak about issues of difference from a range of perspectives," we must continue to seek to create courses that "investigate the cultural conflicts that serve to define and limit [students'] lived experience" (407).

By exposing and situating the historical similarities between the invisibility the teacher's power and dominant, and frequently unquestioned, white power constructs, we add to the

range of perspectives all our students must address, and we further their comprehension of new ways to interrogate power and authority, in and out of the classroom.

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